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# “Virtual Autism” May Explain Explosive Rise in ASD Diagnoses

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Some children who have been diagnosed with autism or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) could dramatically benefit from not being exposed to electronic screens.

New clinical case studies have found that many young children who spend too much screen time—on TV’s, video games, tablets and computers—have symptoms labeled as “autism.”1 When parents take away the screens for a few months the child’s symptoms disappear. The term for this phenomenon is “Virtual Autism” or autism induced by electronic screens. The term “Virtual Autism” was coined by Romanian clinical psychologist Dr Marius Zamfir.

Romania witnessed an astonishing rise in autism among youngsters in a children’s hospital. The cause was unknown, so one psychiatrist dug into the activity logs the hospital collected on all admitted patients. In those records he found a strong trend: children presenting with autism were spending four or more hours a day watching some kind of screen: television, computer, tablet, or phone. Today in Romania, treatment of autism by screen withdrawal is considered routine and has public support.2

We are seeing a startling rise in autism diagnoses in the United States, a trend that has parents, teachers, and mental health professionals puzzled and concerned.

These statistics from the Center for Disease Control paint a stark picture of the rising rates of diagnoses:

In 1975, 1 in 5000 children were diagnosed with autism.

In 2005, 1 in 500 children.

In 2014 (the most recent CDC numbers), 1 in 68 children.

The latest government survey of parents suggests that today the number of children living with autism may be as high as 1 in 45. That means that today in the United States a child is 100 times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than children in 1975.

What’s going on? What is behind the exponential rise in the diagnosis of autism? Does removing electronic screens from the lives of at least some young children decrease their risk of autism or even reduce their symptoms after they have been diagnosed?

Two French doctors with expertise in child development, Dr. Isabelle Terrasse and Dr. Anne-Lise Ducanda, have created an excellent [YouTube video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-eIdSE57Jw) that provides some answers. The video is called: “Screens: Danger for children from 0-4 years old” (in French with English subtitles). They made the video based on case studies at Dr. Ducanda’s clinic.. Their intent is to warn parents and health professionals about the rising tide of “Virtual Autism” and to propose solutions. Their research found that some children between the ages of 0 to 4 who were diagnosed with autism benefited from eliminating their exposure to electronic screens.

Dr. Ducanda and Dr. Terrasse looked at children who had been diagnosed with autism at hospitals. (In France, this is where children are typically diagnosed with serious problems.) These children’s symptoms entirely disappeared one month after eliminating their screen time. “Virtual autism” is the term they used to describe this phenomenon. The researchers concluded that screen time hindered these children’s brain development and prevented them from developing a normal social life.

In the video, Dr. Ducanda points out that children’s TV shows teach the child to repeat words without knowing what the words mean. A child can count, but the child doesn’t know what the numbers mean. For example, the child can repeat the number three. But if you ask the child: “Give me three pencils,” the child cannot do it. When shown a picture and asked a question like “What is the little girl doing?” the child simply echoes the words “What is the little girl doing?” instead of answering the question.

Children learn the meaning of words through social interaction—by playing with real objects and having someone look at him and talk with him. A mother says “Put on your coat and we will go out for a walk” which is associated with the action of putting on a coat and going for a walk, giving the words context and meaning. A child learns about the world by manipulating a toy with his hands, feeling it with his mouth and throwing it on the ground. The child’s brain registers the connections.

A small child’s brain cannot develop without this sense of touch and interaction. Light and noise from electronic screens capture a child’s attention, but they do not lead to healthy brain development.3

Indeed, screens are so alluring that it’s difficult for the child to turn to something else. In short, he becomes distracted by the screen and addicted. The screen also isolates the child from human interactions which are necessary to communication skills and language development. Even worse, the noise and light from screens—even cartoons—can generate painful emotions that the child can barely cope with. These feelings can lead to violent and aggressive behavior in a young child.

What is striking about the explosion in diagnoses of autistic spectrum disorder is that it correlates with the increased use of television since 1975 and the digital revolution. In 1975, a typical family had one television screen in their home. Today, with the digital revolution, families often have 10-15 screens. Besides ever-larger TV screens we have desktop computers, laptops, tablets, smart phones and video game players. Tablets are advertised in toy catalogues for babies as young as six months old.

Young children are exposed to screens far more than what is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Academy recommends that children under the age of two not be exposed to screens at all and that older children be limited to two hours a day.

Interestingly, the exploding rise in autism affects children in all rich countries—and only in rich countries. From the perspective of Virtual Autism, it makes sense that countries that have not experienced the digital revolution have not experienced exponential increases in autism diagnoses because their young children are not spending time in front of screens. Dr. Ducanda noticed that after her “autistic” patients spent a month in Africa, without screens, they came back with no symptoms.

If screens are removed from some children with an autism diagnosis, the child’s brain development can return to normal. He begins to play like never before. He returns to normal development. Based on the small studies, we cannot conclude that this is true for every child. But based on mounting numbers of clinical case studies, it is certainly true for some children. Although scientists have not found a genetic link for autism, some children may be predisposed to develop symptoms of autism.

In one French case study, a father who displayed Asperger-like symptoms in his own childhood “treated” his severely autistic 2 1/2 year old by removing screens (which he was watching four to six hours a day). The father also began intensive play sessions with his son. The young boy fully recovered.

Clearly, removing screens from the life of a young child is not an easy task for parents. The child will have tantrums. The rest of the family will be inconvenienced with the television turned off. In my own practice, I’ve had parents object to keeping the TV set turned off in the evening because they like to watch their favorite programs to relax after they come home from work. I’ve suggested to these parents that they record the shows they like and watch them after the children are asleep.

Parents may need support for this change of lifestyle.  In some cases they might need support from a therapist or social worker knowledgeable in child development. But when parents do make the necessary changes, and spend more time with their child in interactive play, the effects can be amazingly beneficial. This is true for any child. And if a child is at risk for autism or has already been diagnosed, there’s even more motivation for parents to try screen removal for a month or so to see if the absence of screen time produces results.

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**Editor’s note:** On September 12th, Marilyn Wedge and psychologist Gretchen LeFever Watson will present a MIA Continuing Education webinar on non-drug interventions for youth diagnosed with ADHD. Register [here](http://education.madinamerica.com/p/nutritional-educational-and-family-interventions-for-kids-with-adhd).

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